MILESTONES

ROCKY MOUNTAIN ARSENAL • SUMMER 2006 • website: www.rma.army.mil

INSIDE

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Rocky Mountain Arsenal Community Information Line 303.289.0136

Summertime at the Refuge

After a temporary two-month closure, the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge opened to the public on June 3. Visitors are now casting their lines and catching largemouth bass, northern pike, bluegill and more at the refuge's lakes. They're also hiking the eight-mile trail system, enjoying guided nature programs and taking wildlife viewing tours.

Photo © Dave Showalter

This season also offers an excellent opportunity to view migratory birds spending their summer vacations at the refuge. Traveling from as far as Argentina and Mexico, the site is a popular destination point for white pelicans, Swainson's hawks, song birds like northern orioles and western king birds, and one of nature's smallest owls - the burrowing owl. Weighing only five to six ounces, burrowing owls mesmerize visitors with their expressive bright yellow eyes and long spindly legs. Unlike other owls, the burrowing owl has a unique home, as it lives and nests in abandoned prairie dog burrows.

Drop by the refuge Saturdays and Sundays from 6 a.m. - 4 p.m., or the first Saturday and third Sunday of each month from 6 a.m. - 7 p.m., to get a closer look at summer's migratory birds, tour the site, fish and enjoy your national wildlife refuge. To enter the site, use the south entrance at 56th Avenue and Havana Street. All programs are free with the exception of a $3 daily fee for fishing. For more details and tour reservations, please call 303-289-0930. Visit www.fws.gov/rockymountainarsenal for program details. ■

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A Growing Partnership

Much like your garden, the Rocky Mountain Arsenal's prairie grasslands need rich topsoil to help young seeds grow. Where does the Arsenal get its topsoil you may wonder? Some comes from our new neighbor to the west, the Prairie Gateway redevelopment project in Commerce City, Colo.

As part of the Prairie Gateway construction, topsoil was removed to make way for its many infrastructure projects. Since there was no future use for the soil, it would normally be trucked off the site. However, the Arsenal has a large need for the soil to help complete the site's cleanup process.

The Arsenal has a few large areas with very shallow contamination. Here, one foot of soil is excavated, and clean topsoil is put in its place. The soil is a key component to the cleanup process, as it gives the seeds of native plants and grasses the necessary nutrients to grow and re-establish the Arsenal's shortgrass prairie.

Beginning in April, Arsenal trucks began loading the unused topsoil from the Prairie Gateway and transporting it to Arsenal grounds. Because of the proximity of the two projects, it offers great benefits to neighbors and commuters in this area. Arsenal trucks are using a special entrance located between the Prairie Gateway project and the Arsenal to haul the material without routing truck traffic onto public roads. ■

Basin F Wastepile Project Successfully Progressing

With more than two months of work completed, the Basin F Wastepile project continues with no odor impacts to the surrounding communities. The project began April 3 and involves excavating contaminated material from the wastepile and placing it into the Rocky Mountain Arsenal's enhanced landfill. Proven odor control techniques, such as applying foam and using overnight covers, continue to be used, and less than one acre of the 93-acre site is excavated at a time.

Along with odor control techniques, the Arsenal's on-site 140-foot meteorological tower provides staff with real-time weather information. Because weather conditions play such an important role in the wastepile's daily excavation, the tower's information helps the project team determine when to schedule work and decide if operations should be modified.

Prior to the start of the project, more than 600 neighbors from the Brighton, Commerce City and Montbello communities heard presentations about the wastepile. The Arsenal partnered with representatives from the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, the Environmental Protection Agency and Tri-County Health Department on this community outreach effort. The goal was to explain the project to residents and ensure neighbors knew how to reach the Arsenal if they had questions.

For more information on the wastepile project, call 303-289-0136 or visit our Web site at www.rma.army.mil. ■

Photo: Rich Keen/DPRA Inc.

Native Grasses Take Root

Colorado's shortgrass prairie at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge is taking root and spreading throughout its boundaries. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service restoration staff skillfully selects, plants and manages seeds of warm and cool-season native grasses, shrubs and wildflowers over the 16,000-acre site.

Service staff carefully chooses the right mix of native plants for reseeding areas based on the type of soils present and what native plants will grow best in these soils. For example, sandier soils will have a mix of taller warm-season grasses to duplicate a sand prairie habitat with plants like sand bluestem, switchgrass, and yellow indiangrass. Shortgrasses like blue grama and buffalograss are planted in clay-like soil.

To keep the refuge's native prairie grasslands flourishing, the Service uses prescribed burns in the spring and fall. Burning the vegetation improves wildlife habitat, controls weeds and reduces the amount of leaves, dead grass, branches and dead trees to help reduce or prevent wildfires. Fire returns minerals and nutrients directly to the soil, making them immediately available to plants, and kills weed seeds and annual weeds. After a burn, native plants come back much more robust and healthy.

Neighbors near the refuge may have seen smoke this spring from these prescribed burns, as close to 900 acres were successfully burned. In the fall, neighbors may see more smoke, as the Service hopes to burn another 250 acres. Typically, burning does not occur during the summer months because grassland birds are using areas for nesting and not enough rain falls during the hot summer months to help grasses grow after a fire.

The Service carefully develops a burn plan with specific goals for each area. Burn plans "prescribe" the appropriate temperature, weather, and necessary fire techniques to properly renovate an area. The prescribed burns are closely coordinated with the State of Colorado and entities surrounding the site such as Denver International Airport. The Service obtains a special smoke permit each year before burning, and burns can only be conducted on specific days. Public notification of an intended burn is provided through several media outlets before the season begins as well as on each burn day.

Fire is an important tool for land managers, but it can only be used under very specific conditions and only at certain times of the year. When fire can't be utilized to eliminate weeds, the Service actively mows and uses herbicides to kill weeds, keeping the prairie in good health. Some weeds, like cheatgrass, can take over native grasslands quickly. Controlling and removing weeds, whether by prescribed burns, herbicide spraying or mowing, gives native plants room to grow. The Service's overall goal is to reseed close to 10,000 acres with more than 4,000 acres already completed.

Next time you visit the refuge or drive by the site, take a closer look at the new vegetation. It's an example of Colorado's native plants and grasses that once rolled across the prairie lands for as far as the eye could see. ■

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Photo: Rich Keen/DPRA, Inc.

Arsenal's Cornerstone Project Complete

The hazardous waste landfill was one of the Arsenal's first construction projects. The groundbreaking took place in 1998, and the first of two cells was completely constructed and ready to accept Arsenal-only waste in 1999.

Using the most advanced technology of the time, the landfill was built using layers of soil, clay and thick plastic liners to keep the waste in place. Designed to last 1,000 years, the landfill design met Adams County requirements and received approval from federal, state and local regulatory agencies.

Now that the landfill is full, its final cover system is being constructed. A portion of the gravel layer that provides erosion control is already in place, and soon more gravel will be added to cover the entire area. Next, a liner system consisting of clay sandwiched between two thick plastic liners will be added. A layer of crushed concrete will follow to prevent burrowing animals from entering the landfill. Finally, 4.5 feet of clean soil will create the top of the landfill cover with native plants and grasses added to re-establish the native prairie grassland.

Neighbors driving by the northern area of the site can see the landfill located near the Arsenal's checkered water tower. ■

Photo: Rich Keen/DPRA Inc.